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ABSTRACT

The life styles and life chances of the unmarried include elements of choices. Singles may be grouped and characterized according to whether their status may be considered stable or temporary. A life cycle, or continuum model of singlehood is reviewed, including its different factors, or phases. A new model for singles is proposed--a life spiral model to reflect varying patterns of adulthood. (Life spiral means incorporation of traditional and alternative roles in the life course.) The life spiral is a non-linear definition of the life span, which enables the viewing of individuals who choose alternate paths of adult life. The focus is on identifying the presence or absence of traditional patterns, on the emergence of new roles and on alternative sequences of new and old roles. The new model incorporates a theory of human needs and an analysis of the ways individuals and groups meet these needs. (Author/BMW)

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UNDERSTANDING SINGLE ADULTHOOD

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WHO ARE THE SINGLES?

Introduction

The word single describes a number of lifestyles and life chances. There is a rich variety of unmarried adult men and woman in American society. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the characteristics of these groups and to highlight their experiences. A more detailed study will be found in a forthcomung book by this author.

There are over 47 million unmarried adults who are over the age of 18. As Table I illustrates, 29 percent of American men and 35 percent of American women over 18 are unmarried. This population varies with respect to age; previous marital status; and if married, marital termination as a consequence of desertion, divorce, or death; living arrangements; sexual preferences; educational, occupational, and income levels; class background and identification; ethnic and racial identification; religion; and parental status.

It is a testament to the imperialism of marriage that singles are regarded as a residual category. People are either married or they are not married, i.e., they are single. The legal distinction tells us little about the kind of interaction that occurs within single or married relationships.

The lives of the unmarried are as complex and heterogeneous in contacts as those of the married. This is not apparent because singles are subject to stereotyping which partly determines the

TABLE I

THE MARITAL STATUS OF THE U.S. POPULATION, AGE 18 AND OVER, 1977

(in thousands of persons)

	Total	Married	Never Married	Divorced	Widowed
Men	70,320	49,889	15,380	3,172	1,887
Women	77,947	50,912	12,152	4,859	10,023
Percent Distribution					
Men	100%	70.9%	21.9%	4.5%	2.7%
Women	100%	65.3%	15.6%	6.2%	12.9%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 323, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March, 1977." U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1977.

way other groups and social institutions respond to them, and in part determines the reactions of the singles to themselves.

A CONTINUUM OF SINGLEHOOD

The lifestyles and life chances of the unmarried include elements of choice and permanence of choice regarding singlehood. The continuum in Table II indicates the extent to which singlehood is voluntary or involuntary and stable or temporary. Included for completeness are people who were formerly married as well as those who have never married.

Voluntary Temporary Singles

Among those who have chosen to be single on a temporary basis are the younger never-marrieds and the divorced who are postponing marriage for some finite period of time. They are open to the possibility of marriage, but the search for a mate has a lower priority than other activities such as education, work, career, politics, self-development, and so forth. It also includes men and women who have lived together in order to try out marriage-like arrangements (Macklin, 1972; Lewis, 1975; Yllo, 1978). However, not all of the voluntary temporary singles will marry "on time" since some will not find appropriate mates and others will marry at a later date than desired (Glick, 1975).

Voluntary Stable Singles

Among those who have chosen to be single as a stable condition

are those who have never married and are satisfied with that choice (Stein, 1978; Adams, 1976); those who have been married but do not want to remarry (Stein, 1976); cohabitators not intending to marry (Cole, 1977); and those whose lifestyles preclude the possibility of marriage (e.g., priests and nuns). Also included are single parents, both never married and formerly married, who are not seeking mates and who are raising their children alone or with the help of relatives or friends (Bernard, 1975).

Involuntary Temporary Singles

This category consists primarily of men and women whose marriages were terminated in some manner. It includes the widowed (Lopata, 1973) and divorced (Duberman, 1975) seeking remarriage; and single parents seeking mates (Weiss, 1979; Monahan, 1978). It also includes younger never-marrieds who do not want to be single and are actively seeking mates and never-marrieds who had not been interested in marriage, but are now actively seeking mates. These are men and women who believe in marriage and would like to be married.

Involuntary Stable Singles

This category consists primarily of older divorced, widowed, and never-marrieds who wanted to marry or to remarry, have not found a mate, and have come to accept being single as a probable life situation. It also includes those singles who suffer from

physical or psychological impairment which prevents them from being successful in the marriage market (Kuhn, 1955).

The continuum suggests that classifications vary according to the stage of the life span occupied by members of the group being classified. For example, as younger never-marrieds who regarded singlehood as a temporary state become older, some marry and others, unable to find an appropriate mate, remain single involuntarily and become increasingly concerned about the possibility of never finding a mate. Others may enjoy their single state and begin to see it as a stable rather than a temporary condition. The same person can identify singlehood as a voluntary temporary status before marriage, then marry and divorce, and become "single again" as a voluntary stable, involuntary stable, or involuntary temporary single, depending on his/her experiences and preferences.

The Life Cycle of Single Adults

The concept of the life cycle, initially proposed by Erik Erikson (1959), adds a dynamic aspect to this otherwise static continuum. The stage of the life cycle is also related to issues of lifestyle and life chances and the need and availability of social support systems.

Levinson (1978), has suggested a model for the various stages of adult life. He compares these stages to the seasons of a single year. He suggests that development is sequenced in predictable segments which follow each other in chronological

TABLE II

CONTINUUM OF SINGLEHOOD

	Voluntary	Involuntary
Temporary	-younger never-marrieds postponing marriage for a few years	-younger never-marrieds actively seeking mates
	-recently divorced persons who are currently seeking mates	-formerly married (divorced and widowed) persons seeking remarriage
	-cohabitators considering marriage	-single parents seeking mates
		-never-marrieds who were not interested in marriage for a number of years but are now actively seeking mates
Stable	-men and women choosing to be single	-older widowed, divorced, and never-marrieds who wanted to marry or remarry, have not found a mate, and have accepted the idea of singlehood as a probable life state
	-single parents not seeking spouses	
	-cohabitators not intending to marry	
	-formerly marrieds (divorced and widowed) not seeking to remarry	-never-marrieds who are impaired physically or mentally in some way and not able to succeed in the marriage market
	-religionaries	

order. His model was developed from studies of married men. The stage model is useful when applied to the lives of single people, but it is limited.

Stages assume that development is hierarchical, sequenced in time, and cumulative. The implications of life-course stages are that (1) every "normal" adult must pass through the stages, (2) each stage has distinctive qualities which are tasks that must be accomplished during that stage, (3) an individual is more or less successful in negotiating these crises, (4) successful resolution of a prior stage is necessary for the successful resolution of subsequent stages, and (5) each stage is tied to chronological age (Brim, 1977). According to Levinson, "although important changes go on within it, each season or era has its own distinctive and unifying qualities, which have to do with the character of living." (Levinson, et.al., 1978:18)

Stein and Etzkowitz (1977,1978) suggest that life has many seasons and that a spiral more accurately represents life's configuration. Development is not necessarily related to chronological age, and themes of development may be resolved at one age only to need reevaluation later on. Developmental stages may overlap; one may never resolve certain issues. Life is an ongoing process with themes and patterns which repeat. It is less like the seasons of a single year than like a panorama of seasons.

These two contrasting models may be seen as representing a continuum. For adults whose lives follow fairly traditional patterns of development, the cycle, with its stages, may accurately

represent their lives. Less traditional lives may be more accurately described by the spiral model. There may be changes over the span of one's life: the spiral may be more accurate at one period, the cycle more accurate at another. This paper will consider first the cycle and then the spiral models of single adulthood.

The Young Never-Marrieds

We can identify various stages of the adult life cycle. The years from the early 20's to about 28, constitute the period of "getting into the adult world," where the focus of one's life shifts from the "family of origin to a new home base in an effort to form an adult life of one's own" (Levinson, et.al., 1974, p. 246). It is a time of "exploration and initial choice ... exploratory searching, provisional choices" (p. 247). It is a time of assessing the correctness of initial choices and increasing the commitment to choices.

The 17 year period between 1960 and 1977 witnessed an increase in the percentage of both men and women between the ages of 20 and 29 who have remained single. In 1977, for example, 45% of women in the 20 to 24 years-old category had never married, compared to 28% in 1960. For men in the same age group, the increase has been from 53% never-married in 1960 to 64% in 1977. The percentage single for the age group 25 to 29 has also increased during the years spanning 1960 to 1977. Table III documents these changes.

In 1960, the median age at first marriage for women was 20.3:

TABLE III

WOMEN AND MEN REMAINING SINGLE (1960-1977)

	1960	1970	1977	Change From 1970 to 1977
Women remaining single:				
Ages 20 - 24	28.4%	35.8%	45.3%	+ 9.5%
Ages 25 - 29	10.5%	10.5%	16.1%	+ 5.6%
Men remaining single:				
Ages 20 - 24	53.1%	54.7%	63.7%	+ 9.0%
Ages 25 - 29	20.8%	19.1%	26.1%	+ 7.0%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March, 1977. Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 323, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977.

in 1976 it increased to 21.3. The corresponding median age for men at first marriage increased from 22.8 in 1960 to 23.8 in 1976. How can we account for this dramatic shift in the age at first marriage and in the increase of young adults postponing marriage? Several social developments have contributed to this trend. Briefly, these are: (1) the dramatic increase in the number of women enrolled in colleges, graduate and professional schools, (2) expanding employment and career opportunities for women, (3) the impact of the women's movement, (4) the excess of young women at the currently "most marriageable" age resulting in a "marriage squeeze" (Glick, 1975), (5) a shift in attitudes toward the desirability of marriage among both college and non-college youths, (6) the increasing divorce rate which has contributed to questioning the traditional appeal of marriage and family life, and (7) the increasing availability and acceptability of birth control methods. Some researchers suggest a movement away from marriage and family norms particularly when such norms come into conflict with the potentials of individual development and personal growth (Glick, 1975; Duberman, 1977)

With the increase of young adults who remain single has come the tendency for these persons to maintain their own households. The number of persons under age 35 who were living alone doubled between 1970 and 1975, increasing from 1.5 million to 3 million. A somewhat larger proportion of single women than of single men in the 25 to 34 age group maintained their own households. Census data indicates that a majority of the singles population is concentrated in large cities and in specific areas of such cities.

Over 60% of all single persons, compared to under 40% of the adult population ever married, live in large cities (Carter and Glick, 1976). Major concerns of singles are with finding meaningful work, satisfying living arrangements and meeting prospective congenial friends. Large cities have the occupational and social structures to satisfy these concerns. The adjustments made to the world of work and patterns of forming friendships provide crucial connections and a positive sense of self (Starr and Carns, 1972).

The Age 30 Transition

Levinson further suggests that for many the years between 28 and 32 involve considerable turmoil, confusion, and struggle with societal pressures, with family, and with oneself. For others, these years involve a quieter reevaluation of goals and values and an intensification of efforts to achieve such goals. Men and women who have remained single into their 30's reported that the mid to late 20's was a period of great difficulty for many of them (Adams, 1976; Darling, 1976; Stein, 1976; Kurth, 1975; Schwartz, 1976). Demographically, their cohort was severely depleted by marriage. For the 30 to 34-year-olds, only 12% of the men and 7% of the women have never married. These men and women experienced intense societal and parental pressures to marry, and at that time of their lives some of these singles pursued activities designed to meet prospective spouses. Yet, "they derived little intrinsic satisfaction from such activities" and some reported negative experiences, decline in self-esteem, and increased negative self-image.

A major source of difficulty during these years was work-related. This transitional period marked a deeper commitment to an occupation for some, but for others it involved a rejection of earlier occupational choices as too constricting and not meeting initial expectations of satisfaction (Starr and Carns, 1972). More women than men had no clear occupational goals upon graduation from college, and a substantial number of women viewed their occupations as temporary, unsatisfactory, and non-involving. Similarly, living arrangements were seen as temporary, often with a same-sex roommate, to be changed with marriage. "As these singles approached 30, many became critical of those patterns and began to reevaluate their lives ... (including) the recognition of the possibility that they might never marry and that they themselves had the responsibility for designing meaningful lives" (Schwartz, 1976). This included reexamination of earlier occupational decisions, weighing possibilities of starting or returning to graduate schools or professional schools, reevaluating living situations, fixing up living places, developing new interests, starting new activities, and expanding and reinforcing circles of friends.

This group of never-married adults is joined by the increasing number of those who married earlier but are now divorcing, their marriage having lasted, on the average, 6.5 years. The median age at divorce after first marriage is currently 30.3 for men and 28.2 for women (Current Population Report, 1977, #323).

The Middle Years: His and Hers Singlehood

In a summary of empirical studies regarding the state of marriage, Bernard concluded that while "his" marriage is physically, socially, and psychologically good, "her" marriage is filled with frustration, dissatisfaction, negative feelings, unhappiness, and other problems. The situation with respect to singlehood is quite the opposite -- long-term singlehood tends to be experienced as a more positive state for women and a more negative state for men. This is particularly true of the older never-married singles. What are the lifestyles and life chances of these older singles?

Demographically, in the 35 to 39 age group, 7.9% of men and 5.2% of women have never married -- a further depletion of the never-married cohort. These percentages of never-married decrease to 6.6% and 4.2% respectively in the 40 to 44-years-old group.

Bernard reports that women who remain single are superior to single men in terms of education, occupation, and income. These women are often more upwardly mobile than married women, educationally and professionally. By 1970, one in every five women around the age of 40 with some graduate school education, or with an income of $20,000 or more, had not married -- compared to only one in every 20 women with no college.

In comparison, a number of studies have reported that older never-married men are likely to show mental health problems, including depression, severe neurotic symptoms, phobic tendencies, and passivity. In summarizing over a dozen mental health studies, Gove reports that among the unmarried, including the never-marrieds,

the divorced, and the widowed, men more frequently than women have mental health problems.

How can these findings be explained? Is the experience of singlehood more stressful and more contradictory for men compared to women? Or do the men who remain single have more psychological and interpersonal problems to begin with?

CONTEMPORARY ADULTHOOD: LIFE CYCLE OR LIFE SPIRAL

Etzkowitz and I have proposed an alternative to the life cycle model (1977, 1978). We suggest that the nature and extent of social changes affecting the lives of adult men and women and the emergence of new adult roles calls into question the validity of the life cycle model composed of stages.

A new model is required to more accurately reflect varying patterns of adulthood. We propose a <u>life spiral</u> model to revise life cycle theory to accommodate a pluralistic universe of adult life styles and structures. By spiral we mean the incorporation of traditional and alternative roles in the life course.

The life spiral is a non-linear definition of the life span. It enables us to view individuals, such as the never-married, who choose alternate paths of adult life not as deviants (their definition under stage theory) but as conscious actors who occupy new roles in one or more areas of life. The use of the life spiral model leads the researcher to view these new phenomena in their own right. The focus is on identifying the presence or absence of traditional patterns, on the emergence of new roles, and on

alternative sequences of new and old roles.

Our model incorporates a theory of human needs and an analysis of the different ways that individuals and groups meet these needs. While needs are universal, many particular roles may equally well fulfill a need. We suggest that the stages of life cycle theory are better conceived as human needs which can be met through a variety of traditional and alternative roles. Once material needs to insure survival such as food, shelter and clothing are satisfied, a second level of human needs becomes of central personal importance to most individuals. These needs include work, intimacy, avocational activities and social communality. Needs are not resolved during particular age periods but appear as issues to be dealt with throughout the adult years.

The Life Spiral Study of Adult Singles

In 1976 I conducted interviews with a sample of sixty middle-class unmarried men and women, ages 25 to 45. At the time of the interviews, most had completed their formal education and were pursuing careers in various professional occupations. With respect to both intimacy and work roles, the lives of these men and women followed a mixed pattern. About 30 percent of the men and women initially followed the traditional pattern of early marriage (between the ages of 18 and 22). The average duration of these marriages was three and one-half years. Another 20 percent of the sample cohabitated for an average of two years. For the other fifty percent, singlehood included several important intimacy

relationships. Some of these relationships were relatively short-term; others lasted several years. Virtually every one of the thirty singles was involved in at least one stable intimacy relationship lasting more than two years.

For all of these adults a major sourse of intimacy came from opposite and same-sex friendships. In the absence of marriage these single adults noted the importance of substitute networks of human relationships that met their needs for intimacy, sharing and continuity. While pressures from external sources to leave singlehood continued, their membership in various support networks and in validating reference groups enabled them to discount negative evaluations. Such support networks included women's and men's groups, political groups, therapy and encounter groups, and organizations formed around specialized interests. Although not restricted to singles, they were particularly well adapted to meet the needs of single people. These groups were cited as helpful in legitimizing alternative roles and dealing with critical life events.

With respect to work, the adult life course of these men and women involved experimenting with job and career possibilities, exploring vocational and avocational activities between the completion of school and full-time entry into the labor force, and a return, for some, to schooling in the mid and late twenties.

For some of the women and men in our sample the rejection of earlier, more tentative occupational choices did not crystalize until the late twenties and early-mid thirties. About 40 percent

postponed "entry into the adult world" (for Levinson ages 20-28) because they were in graduate school or professional school. About 20 percent were unable to break economic and psychological ties with their family of origin until their early thirties. Rather their lives fit a pattern typified by experimenting with different life styles, by searching for career orientations, and by the desire to keep options open.

For these men and women issues of intimacy and work do not surface "on time" but appeared earlier or later than suggested by Levinson's cycle model. Moreover, even when issues are resolved during the expected age-period, they may reappear at later times and in different settings.

While Levinson's model of adulthood indicates that specific issues are dealt with in stages and transitions through the life-course, our data suggest that issues of adulthood are not symbiotically linked to age stages.

ELEMENTS OF CHOICE: PUSHES AND PULLS

My study of voluntary singles reveals the complex factors that enter into the decision to remain single, to live with a lover, to marry, or to separate (Stein, 1976). These factors can be seen as a series of pushes and pulls and are presented in Table IV.

Pushes represent negative factors in a situation while pulls represent attractions to a potential situation. The strength of these pushes and pulls was found to vary according to a number of

TABLE IV

PUSHES AND PULLS TOWARD MARRIAGE AND SINGLEHOOD

MARRIAGE

Pushes (negatives in present situations)	Pulls (attractions in potential situations)
Socialization	Approval of parents
Pressure from parents	Desire for children and own family
Desire to leave home	Example of peers
Fear of independence	Romanticization of marriage
Loneliness	Physical attraction
No knowledge or perception of alternatives	Love, emotional attachment
Job availability, wage structure, and promotions	Security, social status, social prestige
Social policies favoring the married and the responses of social institutions	Legitimation of sexual experiences

SINGLEHOOD

Pushes (to leave permanent relationships)	Pulls (to remain single or return to singlehood)
Lack of friends, isolation, loneliness	Career opportunities and development
Restricted availability of new experiences	Availability of sexual experiences
Suffocating one-to-one relationship, feeling trapped	Exciting lifestyle, variety of experiences, freedom to change
Obstacles to self-development	Psychological and social autonomy, self-sufficiency
Boredom, unhappiness, and anger	Support structures: sustaining friendships, women's and men's groups, political groups, therapeutic groups, collegial groups
Role playing and conformity to expectations	
Poor communication with mate	
Sexual frustration	

Stein, Single, Prentice Hall, 1976.

other variables, including stage of the life cycle, sexual identification, extent of involvement with parents and family, availability of friends and peers, and perception of choice. For some, dating patterns, pressures from parents, and acceptance of the cultural script led to early involvement and marriage. At a later time in their lives, these same persons found greater pulls toward satisfying careers, work colleagues, developing friendships, all of which seemed more possible outside of marriage.

Others never married and found the advantage of the single state satisfying enough to remain unmarried. These men and women offered many positive reasons, or pulls, for remaining single. They spoke of freedom, enjoyment, career opportunities, developing friendships, economic self-sufficiency, enjoyable sexual experiences, and personal development. They experienced the factors Adams (1976) cites for making singleness a viable lifestyle: economic independence, social and psychological autonomy, and a clear intent to remain single by preference.

The interview data suggests that singlehood contributes to a developed personality. Singles are highly adaptive. Without the clarity of role models or the support of society, they shape their lives by taking risks and forging into uncharted territory. In a married setting, there is a division of labor which is supported by our socialization experiences and cultural values. Without the support of a partner and only varying social support, adults who choose singlehood can be understood as pioneers of an emergent cultural lifestyle.

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